THE
Sponge Industry
OF
TARPON SPRINGS
FLORIDA

ADDRESS OF

E. P. MACRENARIS

BEFORE THE

TARPON SPRINGS ROTARY CLUB

GENTLEMEN:

SPONGES are one of the first articles of which we have any knowledge. Commercially—they were traded in long before the Christian era, are mentioned in the Bible and frequently referred to in the ancient writings of Greece.

The original name in Greek was Zoofitan, meaning half plant and half animal, from the doubt as to which classification they really belonged.

There is no really efficient substitute for the sponge and throughout the ages the demand has fully equalled production, and today new industrial uses, which are constantly being discovered, obviate any likelihood of a surplus. This is proven by the fact that while Tarpon Springs is by far the largest sponge producing spot in the United States there are never any left on hand either at the Sponge Exchange, or in the packing houses. As a matter of fact the latter are usually shut down after a catch is disposed of until the boats come in again.

Unlike any other saleable commodity that is a product of nature, and not manufactured, the sponge is not an annual, such as wheat, cotton, fruits and vegetables, and owing to the location of the sponge beds, and our semi-tropical climate, fishing goes on the year round excepting during severe storms when the boats run into port for protection.

First Sponges from Grecian Islands

It is not my intention to go into the history of sponges; this is fully covered by the various bulletins issued from time to time by the government at Washington and which anyone may obtain on application. The following are a few particulars that have come within my personal knowledge during the past sixty years.

The earliest known sponges came from the waters of the Mediterranean and Agean Seas,

doubtless being cast up after the storms on the shores of the islands which stud those waters. Their usefulness was at once determined, resulting in the starting of an industry which has continued up to the present day.

Sponges, as you know them, are really only the skeleton structure left after the pulp constituting the body has been removed. This is easily done with the aid of sun and water.

My grandfathers fished with a long pole having a three-pronged straight harpoon—note the tripronged hook, used on "hooker" boats at the present day.

With this harpoon they gathered sponges at varying depths, from five to thirty feet, depending on the smoothness of the waters and consequent visibility of the bottom. When breezes rippled the surface making it difficult or impossible to see, they took a wooden bowl, filled it with a mixture of sand, sea water and olive oil, then with a large wooden spoon threw the mixture ahead of the boat. The sand of course sank, leaving a film of oil which, as everyone knows, smoothens out the ripples, leaving a surface through which the bottom was visible the same as when the water was normally clear. The fishers became so expert at this that the sand could be thrown some fifty feet ahead giving time for the film of oil to spread and cover a large area before the boat reached the spot.

Subsequently the glass-bottomed bucket came into use. This is some 12 or 14 inches round and of about the same depth; it is held in the left hand and is lowered about an inch into the water to be below any surface movement, thus enabling a clear view of the sea bottom, no matter how rough the surface might be, the fisher using the pole in his right hand to hook sponges on the sea bottom.

When it became known that better sponges grew at greater depths, "skin" diving came into

vogue, the diver using a heavy rope and a heavy stone, the latter to facilitate quick descent. These skin divers could operate at as great a depth as two hundred feet remaining under water from three to three and one-half minutes.

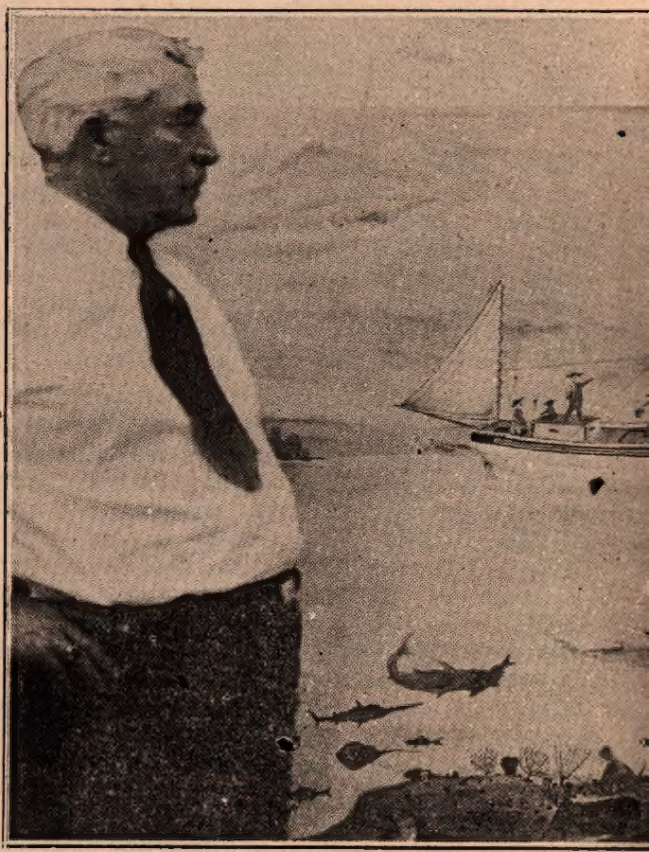
The same rope was also used as a life line which passed through a ring on a bracelet worn on the arm enabling the diver by prearranged signals to signify his desire to be pulled up either from sickness or because he had completed his catch. These skin divers were not afflicted with partial paralysis or "bends" as is unhappily too often the case today with the adopted diving suits and consequent necessary air pressure.

About 1870 or some sixty years ago, diving suits were introduced. These were the old fashioned style with two cylinders and required the men to pump the air, one on each side pumping up and down alternately; now we use a three cylinder with a rotary pump worked with an engine. The introduction of the diving suit increased the diver's time from three minutes to four or five hours, according to depth. He uses a life line for signaling so that when his bag is full is can be hauled up and another empty bag sent down—there is a life-line tender constantly watching, whose sole business it is to watch this line. Two signals means another bag while one signal means "up" and demands quick action. His progress is traced by the air bubles and in this way the boat is enabled to follow him as he covers the sponge bed or moves on to another one.

The number of divers on a boat is governed by the depth at which they work—from 30 to 50 feet in depth there are two divers, 50 to 75 feet three divers, 75 to 100 feet four divers and from 100 to 120 feet five or more divers.

How Divers Work

These work alternately, deep water divers only remaining under water from 20 to 35 minutes at a time. The equipment consists of two suits.



E. P. MACRENARIS DIVING FOR SPO

Two collars but only one helmet, the latter being interchangeable. The relieving diver is fully dressed, excepting the helmet, which is removed from the ascending diver and immediately screwed on the collar of the one about to descend thereby avoiding any waste of time.

The crew other than the divers consists of a captain, engineer, life-line tender, cook and two or more deck men according to the size of the boat. As the bags are hauled on board the pulp

GES IN THE GULF

or animal matter is squeezed out of the sponges by treading or working them with their feet. They are then strung on twine and hung in the sun and during the night thrown overboard so that the action of the water may complete the disintegration of the pulp, taken in the next morning, the skin scraped off with a knife, and again hung between the masts to complete the curing. What is left is called the sponge.

Boats make an average of three trips a year,

the annual value of the catch varying according to the capacity of the boat and the price at which the catch is sold. Some boats of course receive a larger sum than others but this is offset by the larger number of the crew among whom the amount is divided.

Everything is done on the share basis. From selling price is deducted the costs of the operations, interest, insurance, repairs, fuel, etc., and after the profit is determined, it is allocated as follows: Boat 5 shares, diver 3 shares, engineer 2 shares, life-line tender 1 1-2 shares, cook 1 1-2 shares and deckhands 1 1-2 shares each.

Value of Sponge Crop

The total value of sponges produced by diving boats sold through the Tarpon Springs Exchange in 1927 was $886,381, and in 1928 $729,676 and in 1929, $692,259, or a total for the three years of $2,308,316.00 plus $255,000 derived during the same time from hooker boats. These are all packed here so we may add the cost of packing, clipping, upkeep of the plants, etc., and we can then realize that this single industry means at the very least a cool million dollars a year to Tarpon Springs.

Sponges are sold through the Sponge Exchange which stores the catch till sale, conducts the auction and charges the boats half of one percent on the gross for the upkeep of the exchange. They are sold generally by weight so much per pound, but some kinds are figured by the piece. The auction is a silent one, each boat's catch is assembled in the exchange arena, the buyers look them over and hand in their written bids to the Exchange Manager, who, after all bids are in announces only the name of the highest bidders and the amount. So expert are these bidders and so keen the competition that frequently in a catch amounting to several hundred dollars a difference of a few cents is all that divides the successful bidder from his competitor.

Should the boat (that is the crew) be dissatisfied with the bid, they have the option of refusing

it and the sale of that particular lot is put off until the following day; should the bid be again rejected, the sponges must be at once removed from the Exchange and must be disposed of by private sale. This, however, rarely occurs as the crew are anxious to get started on another trip but cannot do so or get outfitted until their previous obligations are liquidated.

How the Sponge Grows

As I said at the beginning a sponge is really an animal. It reproduces itself by throwing off spores like oysters spawn; these spores, which are so small as to be practically invisible, float about until they attach themselves to some hard substance such as rock; their growth is very slow for the first four months, after which they rapidly enlarge at the rate of one third of an inch a month all over and when they have attained a diameter of five inches or over this being the limit fixed by Uncle Sam, they are considered full grown for commercial purposes.

Not as particularly affecting sponges themselves but of interest to the Chamber of Commerce, I may mention that the Greek Community a short time ago had a tabulation made of the real estate holdings of my people, who remember are here only because of the sponge industry, and the assessed value of their holdings was in excess of one million one hundred thousand dollars. Just one thought regarding this, which I think you will agree is of especial interest. My countrymen as a whole did not speculate and buy land during the boom, and this amount practically represents homes or business blocks.

Bad weather is not then entirely a loss to the fishers as the sponges are readily and constantly growing, in the same way a bed or ground that is thoroughly fished today will be just as fruitful in a year's time.

Sponges don't decay, hence the problem of disposal of trimmings or clippings as they are

called—doubtless a commercial use will sooner or later be found thus making a profit of what is now a loss.

The sponges from these waters are of varying qualities with trade names of sheep-wool, yellow, wire and grass, the sponge fished from the deeper waters having a closer and consequently more durable fiber. Several other varieties are found in the Mediterranean but these do not affect the American market.

They Introduced Diving

The diving industry was introduced to Tarpon Springs in 1905—hooking having been carried on for some years previously in the Bahamas, at Nassau and around Key West. The sponge is indigenous in these waters and undoubtedly some of my countrymen on their migration to the land of opportunities noticed the similarity between the isles of Greece of which Byron sang and the islands which at one time were the haunts of buccaneers and naturally interested themselves in an industry with which they were familiar. They eventually made a permanent location here, with the result that Tarpon Springs receives from their efforts upwards of $3,000 a day, week-days and Sundays, and Macrenaris has the honor of giving this talk.

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